

2000 Session: *The Year in Review*



Representative **Luke Esser**

48th District

April/May 2000

Dear Friends and Neighbors,

As I write this newsletter the supplemental state budget for the 1999-2001 biennium is still being negotiated. While the work of finalizing the budget continues, I wanted to share with you some of the legislative accomplishments of the 2000 session.

My top priority after the passage of Initiative 695 was scrutinizing our budget for savings and efficiencies so that we could stretch existing tax revenues as far as possible. I proudly supported the initial House Republican budget proposal, which reduced overall state spending while increasing spending on education, transportation and public safety.

However, it was necessary to negotiate a compromise. The bipartisan House of Representatives budget we passed last month spent more money overall and left less in reserves than I would have preferred, but it had many good points as well: all state lottery profits were devoted to education, and long-term funding was provided for transportation and criminal justice programs that lost car tab revenues when I-695 passed.

We passed a Patients' Bill of Rights to make sure that medical decisions are made by you and your doctor, and an Individual Market bill to reduce government regulations that drove most private health insurers out of the state. We also passed a pipeline safety bill.

A final budget must still be negotiated with the State Senate, but I remain hopeful of a quick finish if all parties negotiate in good faith. As always, please don't hesitate to contact me if you have questions or comments about your state government.

Sincerely,

Luke Esser

Luke Esser
State Representative, 48th District

Olympia office:

420 John L. O'Brien Bldg.
P.O. Box 40600
Olympia, WA 98504-0600
(360) 786-7936

New District Office:

611 Market Street, #5
Kirkland, WA 98033
(425) 739-1818

Toll-free legislative hotline:

(800) 562-6000

**TTY-TDD for the
Hearing Impaired:**

(800) 635-9993

e-mail:

esser_lu@leg.wa.gov

**Legislative information
on the Internet:**

<http://www.leg.wa.gov>

**State government
on the Internet:**

<http://access.wa.gov>



"Funding Roads, Schools & Making 695 Work"

From the very start of the 2000 legislative session our biggest challenge has been implementing the requirements of Initiative 695 while maintaining core government services. When a King County Superior Court judge ruled that I-695 was unconstitutional, the Legislature quickly passed a bill to implement the \$30 license tab portion of the initiative. The fate of I-695's requirement that voters approve all future tax increases has yet to be determined.

Back in February the House Republicans came out with a budget proposal that I enthusiastically supported. This budget proposal actually cut overall state spending while increasing spending for education, transportation and public safety. However, the 49-49 tie between Democrats and Republicans in the House of Representatives made it necessary to negotiate a bipartisan compromise for our operating and transportation budgets.

Operating Budget

The bipartisan House budget included property tax cuts for seniors, increased funding for education, and provided long-term funding for transportation and criminal justice programs that lost car tab revenues when I-695 passed. One of the provisions of the budget was a requirement that all profits from the state lottery be devoted to education, a long-overdue change.

Though the compromise budget spent more money overall and kept less in reserves than I would have preferred, it did maintain a commitment to abiding by the voter-approved spending limits of Initiative 601. Government can and should become far more efficient, and future legislatures should build on what has been accomplished in the bipartisan House budget.

Transportation Budget

When I-695 passed last year, its biggest impact was on our state's transportation budget. As anyone who lives in the Puget Sound region knows only too well, traffic congestion is terrible — the Seattle area is now ranked third-worst in the nation. Every hour we spend stuck in gridlock is an hour we can't spend with our family or friends.

The bipartisan House budget included a \$1.2 billion long-term funding plan for critical transportation projects designed to improve safety and significantly reduce traffic congestion. Traffic will only worsen if we don't take action now.



HEALTH CARE: Increasing Choice, Decreasing Costs

My goal this year was to make sure every citizen of our state has access to affordable health insurance and to give patients the right to make their own health care choices with their doctors.

Providing a Patients' Bill of Rights

When it comes to something as personal as your own health care, government should have no business telling you which doctor to use or what operation or drugs you need. Neither should accountants who work for private health insurance carriers. These decisions should be left between you and your doctor. That's why I joined the bipartisan effort to pass a Patients' Bill of Rights.

Now signed into law, the Patients' Bill of Rights will protect your privacy by preventing health plans from releasing personal information unless you authorize it. It also requires carriers to fully disclose plan information and guarantees that you can see a specialist or get a second opinion when needed. Most importantly, only you and your doctor can determine what treatments are needed.

Revitalizing the Insurance Market

Health insurance in Washington State is reaching a crisis. In 32 of Washington's 39 counties, people can no longer buy individual insurance policies. Excessive government restrictions slowly killed the health insurance market, leading to higher premiums, forcing many carriers to discontinue service, and denying consumers access to quality health care.

The Individual Market bill I supported was passed and signed into law. Now, competition will improve access and reduce costs. The result: more choices for consumers and greater access to affordable health care.

Education: Student success is what it's all about!

I received an excellent education in our local public schools and I continue to believe that a quality education that challenges students is the gateway to a brighter future. I'm pleased to report that progress was made during the 2000 legislative session on a number of education issues, though much remains to be done to ensure that current and future students are provided every opportunity for success.

Devoting All Profits From The State Lottery To Education

The bipartisan House budget included a change to state law which requires that all profits from the state lottery be devoted to education. If agreed to by the Senate, over \$100 million per year of state lottery profits would be deposited in the newly created Better Schools Fund and distributed directly to local school districts based on the number of full-time students.

Local school districts could use the money to reduce kindergarten through 4th grade class sizes, for full-day kindergarten programs and before-and-after school programs, and for a number of other educational purposes.

Teacher Testing: A Good Idea That Can Get Better

Every parent deserves to know that the best possible educators are teaching their children. Teacher testing has been a priority of mine, so I am pleased to report that the state will soon begin a program of teacher testing. However, I did vote against the particular bill that initiated this program because it expands the Olympia bureaucracy more than was really necessary. I will continue to monitor the state's teacher-testing program as it is implemented, with an eye towards greater efficiencies. We must hold teachers to the highest standards of knowledge, experience and preparedness, but we must do so in a way that maximizes teacher quality while minimizing bureaucracy and paperwork.

Fair Teacher Salaries

The bipartisan House budget authorizes a study of the pay discrepancy between teachers in high cost-of-living areas (such as ours) and lower cost-of-living areas. Teachers in our local schools suffer because of a statewide salary scale that pays teachers the same no matter where they live. This study is just the first step toward providing a salary supplement or enhancement to teachers who work in areas with a high cost of living.

Charter Schools

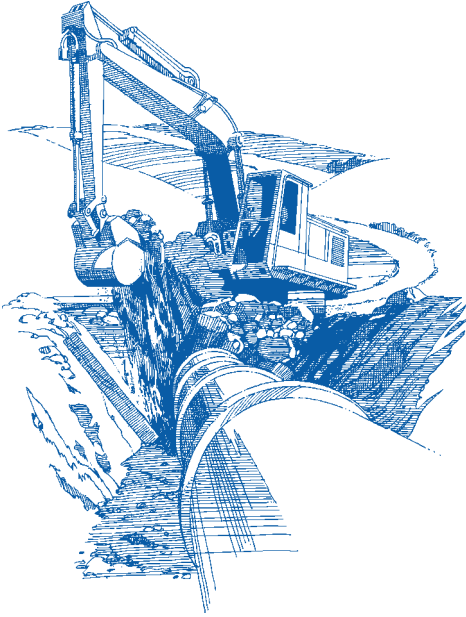
Unfortunately, a bill authorizing the creation of charter schools in Washington state failed to reach the full House of Representatives for a vote during the 2000 regular session. Our state has waited far too long to take advantage of an innovation that more than 30 other states have already implemented, and I will continue to advocate for charter schools.



Rep. Esser with Melana and Jay Kipp of Issaquah, who served as House Pages during the 2000 session.



Pipeline Safety Remains a Priority



The Olympic Pipeline, a gasoline pipeline which runs through Bellevue and Redmond, remains a major safety issue for many local residents. It is imperative that we continue working to ensure that accidents like the fatal June 10th explosion in Bellingham last year never happen again.

Today the Federal Pipeline Safety Act governs safety and environmental issues concerning liquid pipeline facilities. In fact, this federal law prohibits the states from imposing tighter safety laws. I have joined with many at the state and federal level who believe we need to change this policy.

This year the state Legislature passed House Bill 2420, a bipartisan measure that will allow the state to oversee every aspect of pipeline safety as soon as federal law is changed to give us that authority.

Throughout the year I have worked with Bellevue city officials to help them gather additional information about pipeline safety, and I will continue to do whatever I can to make the pipelines in our local communities safer and more secure.

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P.O. Box 40600
Olympia, WA 98504-0600

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